



## Comparing global international student data sources

A growing number of international student destinations are publicly reporting data on the number of international students they host each year. However, comparison of such data sources is confounded by different countries definitions of an international student. For example, the first data column in Table 1 below shows the latest incoming international student data reported by some of the world's major student destinations. When portrayed in this way, the data suggests that Australia hosts more students than the UK. However, this is largely because the UK only reports on its international higher education students, while Australia reports on international students in all its education sectors namely higher education, vocational education and training, English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS), non-award and schools.

Probably the most consistent globally-comparable data is produced by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS)<sup>1</sup>. The advantage of UIS data is that all reporting countries comply with standard definitions, although achieving this results in substantial reporting lags. The latest comprehensive UIS dataset for 2017 for the selected countries reported are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Comparison of different data sources counting incoming international students for select countries**

International students	Latest data reported by country	Reporting period	% growth on previous year	Data reported by country in 2017	UNESCO data & rank order in 2017
USA	1,095,299	2018/19	0%	1,094,792	984,898 (1)
Australia	956,773	2019	10%	799,371	381,202 (3)
Canada	642,480	2019	13%	491,135	209,979 (7)
China	492,185	2018	1%	489,172	157,108 (9)
UK	458,490	2017/18	4%	442,375	435,734 (2)
Germany	374,583	2018	4%	358,895	258,873 (4)
France	343,000	2017/18	6%	323,933	258,380 (5)

The 2017 UIS data demonstrate that the data for the countries in Table 1 above are substantially different than data self-reported by those countries in 2017. This means that caution is required in comparing self-reported data from different countries, albeit such data are accurate with respect to how each country chooses to report its data. For these reasons, the 2017 UIS data is the basis for Australia's claim of being the world's third most popular study destination.

Nonetheless, different countries' self-reported data can provide important insights into their international education sectors. For example, the UIS 2017 count for Australia represents only 48% of the count self-reported by Australia in 2017, as a consequence of Australia hosting many international students who do not fit the UIS definition of tertiary student (ISCED 5-8, 2011), notably certificate-level VET students, as well as English language, non-award and school students. Canada uses a similar approach to Australia, in reporting all study permit holders across all its education sectors, such that only 37% of those were reported in the 2017 UIS data. China's self-reported data incorporates a high proportion of non-award students (50% in 2017<sup>3</sup>) such that only 32% of its self-reported numbers are captured in the 2017 UIS data. Conversely, the UK's self-reported data (primarily higher education award students only) represents a close match to 2017 UIS data.

Different countries' self-reported data also gives the most current view of the global market. A comparison of the latest available growth rates shown in Table 1 indicate that only Canada and Australia have had recent double-digit growth, while growth in the UK and USA has been relatively lower. Consideration of the relative growth rates of the major hosting countries in the years since 2017, suggests Australia is likely to remain the world's third most popular study destination<sup>2</sup>, when the 2018 UIS data set becomes available.

<sup>1</sup> UIS student mobility data from 2011 onwards is available at: <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>. The latest UIS data also underlies the *Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students* visualisation tool.

Self-reported data sources: USA: *Open Doors Fast Facts*, Australia: *International Education*, Canada: *Immigration and citizenship*, China: *Ministry of Education*, UK: *UK Council for international student affairs*, Germany: *Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst German Academic Exchange Services (DAAD)*, France: *Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs*

A comprehensive 2018 data set from the UIS will be released with the release of the *OECD Education at a Glance* report in September 2020.

<sup>2</sup> <https://thepienuews.com/news/uk-likely-overtaken-australia-cqhe/>

For more information, visit <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/international-student-data/pages/default.aspx> or contact [IEResearch@dese.gov.au](mailto:IEResearch@dese.gov.au).